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A NOTE ON THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF NONSTANDARD ENGLISH IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

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AMBIGUOUS SENTENCES WITH "BE" IN THE NONSTANDARD SPEECH OF NEGROES ARE DISCUSSED. THE AUTHOR HYPOTHESIZES THAT THERE ARE DIFFERENCES IN THE UNDERLYING SEMANTIC STRUCTURE (DEEP STRUCTURE) BETWEEN NONSTANDARD NEGRO SPEECH AND OTHER DIALECTS OF ENGLISH, AND THAT A "HABITUATIVE" CATEGORY MUST BE POSTULATED TO REMOVE STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY. A SAMPLING IS TAKEN FROM THE SPEECH OF NEGRO CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF 8 TO 14 IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C., AREA. THREE SIMPLIFIED TREE DIAGRAMS SHOW THE DEEP STRUCTURE DIFFERENCES WHICH GIVE THREE DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS TO THE SENTENCES "I BE BUSY" OR "WHEN YOU COME, I BE BUSY." IN ADDITION TO THE MODALS "WILL" AND "WOULD," THERE IS A THIRD "HABITUATIVE" CATEGORY, WHICH REPRESENTS A RECURRING ACTIVITY ENGAGED IN AT SPECIFIC TIMES. (KL)

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A NOTE ON THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF NONSTANDARD ENGLISH IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Recently it has been suggested that there are differences in deep structure between nonstandard Negro speech and other dialects of English.[1] I wish to argue in favor of this notion by presenting evidence that certain copulative sentences with be are ambiguous and that in order to disambiguate such sentences an Habituative category must be postulated--a category which to the best of my knowledge has not been hypothesized in any of the published descriptions of Nonstandard or Standard English.[2]

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[1]For example, Beryl Loftman Bailey, "Toward a New Perspective in Negro English Dialectology," American Speech 40 (1965) p. 172, said that "...Southern Negro 'dialect' differs from other Southern Speech because its deep structure is different."

In the same article she stated that be is a 'simple future' (p. 175). This paper presents evidence that her analysis of be is inadequate to describe language facts brought to light in the Urban Language Study (ULS) which is being conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

[2]See, for example, R. B. Lees, The Grammar of English Nominalizations, (The Hague: Mouton and Co.) 1966. Also see Sol Saporta, "Ordered Rules, Dialect Differences, and Historical Processes" Lg. 41: 218-224 (1965) and Morris Halle, "Phonology in Generative Grammar" Word 18:54-72 (1962) for some relevant comments on th relation between structuralism and dialectology.

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AL 000 59

From the speech of a fourteen year old informant[3] in the District of Columbia it has been determined that sentences such as

(a) I be busy,

or

(b) When you come I be busy.

are three ways structurally ambiguous.[4]

The following trees display the deep structure differences which serve to differentiate these three possible sentences.[5] Notice that in S_1 and S_2 of S_A and S_B, respectively, Modal has been selected whereas in S_3 this is not the case. Notice further that S_1 and S_2 differ from each other because of the selection of different modals, will and would. Thus, although S_A, S_B and S_C may have the surface representation I be busy each has a different structural description:

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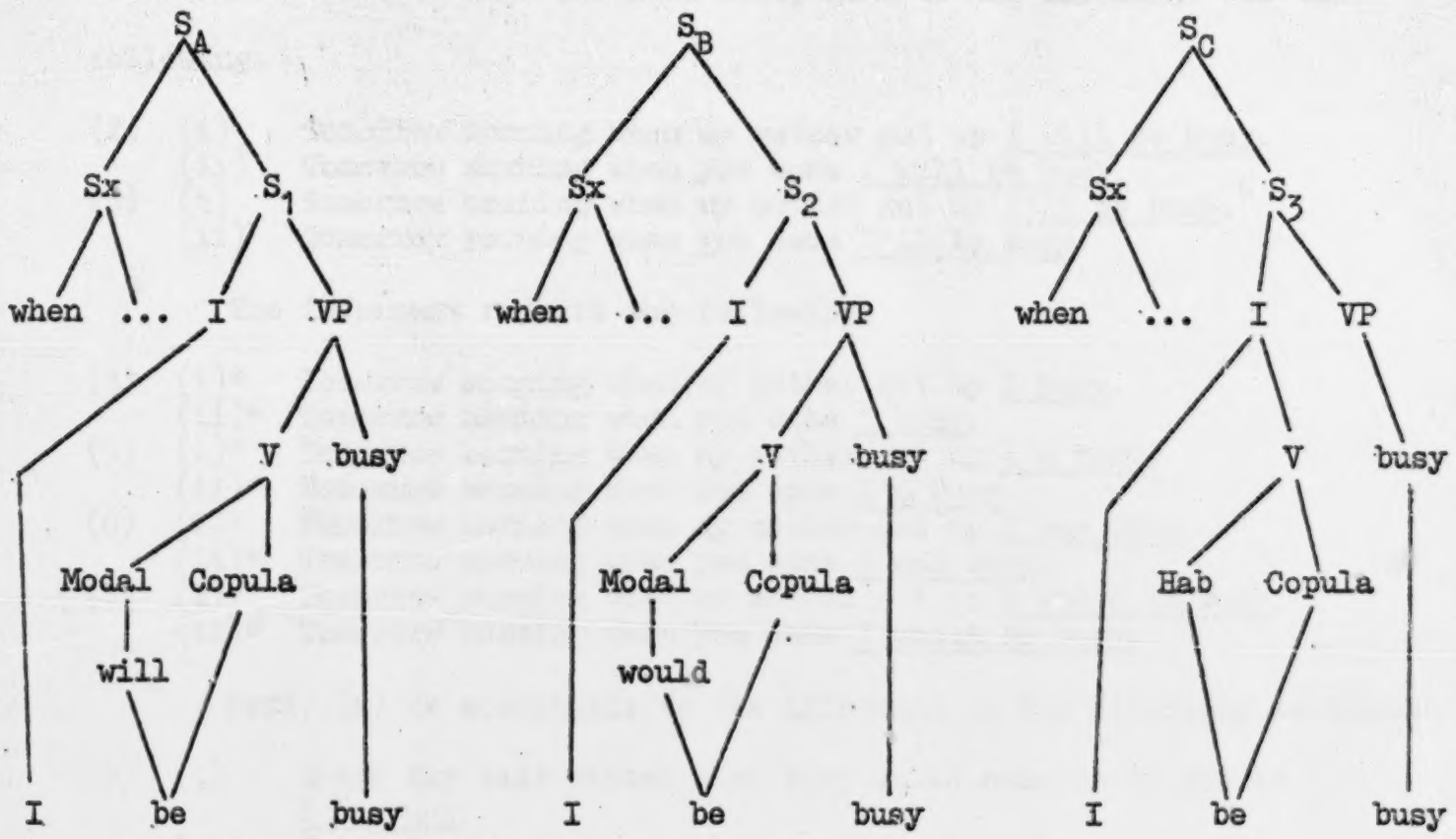
[3]These findings are also corroborated by data from other informants ranging in age from 8 to 14. By chance, the fourteen year old informant referred to is the same age as the character 'Duke' whose speech was analyzed by Bailey. Cf. Warren Miller, The Cool World (Boston, 1959). See footnote # 1. It is also interesting to note that in comparing ULS results with the results available from William Labov's project in New York City and Raven I. McDavid's project in Chicago it is apparent that there is a variety of Nonstandard English spoken by large numbers of urban Negroes. That is, in spite of the fact the speakers of this variety are widely separated in space their language displays a remarkable sameness of structure.

[4]A sentence is presumed to be structurally ambiguous when it may have more than one description assigned to it by the grammar.

[5]Structure displayed in the trees is simplified for the sake of exposition.



Support for the claim that (a) may have the structural description displayed in S_1 is derived from the fact that S_1 has certain realizations which are acceptable to the informant in sentences such as (1) below. In the application of base rules to generate these sentences the modal <u>will</u> must be selected.

(1) (i) Tomorrow morning when my mother get up <u>I be busy</u>.
(ii) Tomorrow morning when you come <u>I be busy</u>.

Realizations of (1) which are also acceptable to the informant are the following:

(2) (i) Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I will be busy.
(ii) Tomorrow morning when you come I will be busy.
(3) (i) Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I'll be busy.[6]
(ii) Tomorrow morning when you come I'll be busy.

The informant rejects the following:

(4) (i)* Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I busy.
(ii)* Tomorrow morning when you come I busy.
(5) (i)* Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I'm busy.
(ii)* Tomorrow morning when you come I'm busy.
(6) (i)* Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I was busy.
(ii)* Tomorrow morning when you come I was busy.
(7) (i)* Tomorrow morning when my mother get up I would be busy.
(ii)* Tomorrow morning when you come I would be busy.

Next, (a) is acceptable to the informant in the following sentences:

(8) (i) Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I be busy.
(ii) Every day last winter when you come I be busy.

He would also accept,

(9) (i) Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I'd be busy.
(ii) Every day last winter when you come I'd be busy.
(10) (i) Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I would be busy.
(ii) Every day last winter when you come I would be busy.[7]

But he rejected,

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[6] My friend and colleague, Philip Luelsdorff, who is working on the phonology of the dialect tells me that I'll in (3) may be phonetically realized as [aɤl] or [aʏ].

[7] I was busy also fits this frame but other evidence gives sufficient reason for not combining be and was.

(11) (i)* Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I busy.
(ii)* Every day last winter when you come I busy.
(12) (i)* Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I will be busy.
(ii)* Every day last winter when you come I will be busy.
(13) (i)* Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I'll be busy.
(ii)* Every day last winter when you come I'll be busy.
(14) (i)* Every day last winter when they would come by to get me I'm busy.
(ii)* Every day last winter when you come I'm busy.

In this sentence it may be presumed that a structural description of (8) has the modal would in its deep structure.

Third, and last, (a) is acceptable to the informant in the sentence

(15) (i) Every day, in the morning, when the others get up at my place I be busy.
(ii) Every day, in the morning, when you come I be busy.

The following sentences are unacceptable to the informant:

(16) (i)* Every day, in the morning, when the others get up at my place I busy.
(ii)* Every day, in the morning, when you come I busy.
(17) (i)* Every day, in the morning, when the others get up at my place I will be busy.
(ii)* Every day, in the morning, when you come I will be busy.
(18) (i)* Every day, in the morning, when the others get up at my place I would be busy.
(ii)* Every day, in the morning, when you come I would be busy.
(19) (i)* Every day, in the morning, when the others get up at my place I'm busy.
(ii)* Every day, in the morning, when you come I'm busy.

It is interesting to note that (a) is unacceptable in

(20)* I be busy right now.

Hence, one may not conclude that be is a substitute for 'm in the Standard sentence:

(21) I'm busy right now.

Thus, whereas in Standard

(22) I'm busy

(a single sentence) is compatible with both (15) and (21), in the Non-standard (22) is acceptable only in (21) and (a) is acceptable only in (15).

It is on the basis of (15) and the non-substitutability of (a) for (22) that we are led to postulate an Habituative category in the deep structure.[8] This category appears to have the function of representing a recurring activity engaged in at specific times.

Thus, (a) in (b) may have any one of the descriptions represented in S_1, S_2, and S_3. This has been demonstrated by considering sentences which must have one of the three deep structure descriptions but not the other two. The disambiguating device, for purposes of presentation, has been one or more time adverbials. Appropriate descriptions were inferred in the cases of S_1 and S_2 from grammatical sentences which involved morphophonemic realizations of the modals will (See examples (2) and (3).) and would (See examples (9) and (10).) plus compatible time adverbials. And S_3 was acceptable as the only alternative in (15) because S_1 and S_2 (See examples (17) and (18).) were rejected as ungrammatical.

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[8]The evidence for an Habituative category is not limited to predicate adjective constructions. On the contrary, preliminary analysis demonstrates that the same functional category may be postulated in constituency with transitive and intransitive verbs.

If the postulation of an Habituative category, or something corresponding to it, in the structure of Nonstandard English proves to be well motivated--and certainly the evidence presented above makes the hypothesis plausible--it is the case that dialects of English have different deep structures.[9]

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[9]It is also the case, at the same time, that the identification of be as a 'simple future' does not suffice to account for the data encountered in the speech of Negroes who speak Nonstandard English in Washington, D.C. (See footnote # 1.)